



Press Release

For Immediate Release

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The Wilkes Expedition: Exploring Our Roots

Annual Exhibit Focuses on Australia and New Zealand, April 1 - 30, 2005

March 25, 2005 - Washington, DC - The Wilkes Expedition: Exploring Our Roots, the U.S. Botanic Garden's annual exhibit celebrating the 1838-1842 U.S. Exploring Expedition led by Charles Wilkes, will open at the USBG Conservatory on April 1 and run through April 30. The USBG celebrates the Wilkes Expedition every year because some of the living plant specimens brought back from the worldwide journey formed the core of the USBG's original plant collection in 1850. This year's Exploring Our Roots, subtitled The Wilkes Expedition A to Z: Australia to New Zealand, focuses on the Expedition's travels to Australia, Antarctica, and New Zealand.

Almost halfway through its four-year worldwide journey, the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1839 arrived in Sydney harbor of "New Holland" (present-day Australia). Shortly thereafter, some of the Expedition members visited New Zealand, while Wilkes himself led several of the ships on a detour to the nearest portion of Antarctica, later named "Wilkes Land." During the Australia and New Zealand visits, the Expedition's Scientific Corps (or "scientifics," as Wilkes himself called them) were relieved to encounter English-speaking settlers at long last, but they also discovered a rich culture among the indigenous peoples, whether the Aborigines of Australia or the Maori of New Zealand. Antique artifacts representative of these cultures are on display in the USBG exhibit, including boomerangs, masks, clothing, spears, and other implements. Also featured are contemporary works by present-day artists of the region, a reconstruction of a small "hut" seen by the scientifics in Australia, and of course living plants native to Australia and New Zealand.

The exhibit also features dried plant specimens collected by the Wilkes Expedition's scientists in Australia and New Zealand. These specimens are on loan from the U.S. National Herbarium, part of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, Department of Botany. As the U.S. Botanic Garden's "Botanical Partner on the Mall," the Botany Department is cosponsor of the annual Wilkes exhibit. Also participating in this year's exhibit are the Australia and New Zealand Embassies, both of which have generously loaned many of the artifacts and artworks to the USBG.

As in past years, the highlight of the USBG exhibit will be the Wilkes Birthday Festival on Sunday, April 3, from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., when Charles Wilkes' 207th birthday will be celebrated. As they explore the exhibit, visitors will enjoy strolling performances by singer/musicians "Ship's Company" and encounters with Captain Wilkes, portrayed by a historical impersonator. The day's festivities will conclude with birthday cake and a performance by the U.S. Navy Sea Chanters at 3:30 p.m.

The U.S. Botanic Garden Conservatory is open to the public, free of charge, every day of the year from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Conservatory is located at 100 Maryland Avenue, SW, at the foot of the U.S. Capitol. Visitors are encouraged to take Metrobus and Metrorail. Further information is available by calling 202-225-8333 or visiting our website at www.usbg.gov.

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